

# God as Restorer: A Theological Overview of the Book of Nehemiah

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## Introduction

The Bible is a book about God. God reveals himself to us through the Scriptures in many ways, and the different books of the Bible show God's grace and grandeur, his multi-faceted character and mercy, his redeeming and restoring love. While the book of Nehemiah primarily portrays God as the One who restores his people to him and to their land, it also portrays the complexity of God's nature and works. The book of Nehemiah teaches us about God's people, their obedience, their faithfulness, and their struggles. On the other hand, the book of Nehemiah also reveals the evil hearts and plans of the unfaithful who rebel against God and try to derail the plans of his people.

After being in the Babylonian exile for seventy years, the Israelites were allowed to return to their homeland. Cyrus the Great, the founder of the Persian Empire gave the edict that the Israelites could return to their own land and even rebuild their temple, the center of their religious life. Nehemiah is one of the leaders of the returning Israelites. The book is divided in two parts: Chapters 1-6 deal with God's restoration of the people, while chapters 7-13 deal with God's reformation of the restored people.<sup>1</sup>

## What does the book of Nehemiah teach us about God?

In the book of Nehemiah God first reveals himself as Creator (1:5). In his opening prayer, Nehemiah prays to "the

God of heaven." The expression "God of heaven" occurs nine times in the Old Testament, and in each instance it refers to Yahweh.<sup>2</sup> Breneman suggests that "the phrase 'God of heaven' was commonly used in the Persian Empire even by the Persians in speaking of their god."<sup>3</sup> The expression points to God's creative power as well as to his awe-inspiring character. He is also the covenant God who both makes and preserves the covenant with his people. God also hears the prayers of his people (1:6, 11; 2:4) and he is the one who forgives their sin (1:7).<sup>4</sup> God is also a God who gives laws and instruction (1:7-8). Although he is loving and merciful, God is holy, righteous, and just, and he must judge and punish those who do not keep his laws and commandments (1:8b).<sup>5</sup> Nehemiah knows that God is the God who restores and redeems his people (1:9-10).<sup>6</sup> By this time Nehemiah is set to go and work towards the rebuilding of Jerusalem, so subsequently he concludes his prayer by appealing to God's mercy and compassion as he prepares for an audience with the king. According to Ezra 4:21, Artaxerxes commanded the ceasing of work in Jerusalem, so Nehemiah knows that humanly speaking his chances are slim. By appealing to God's power, mercy, and compassion, he recognizes that Yahweh showed compassion to the patriarchs (2 Kgs 13:23) and he showed compassion to his people after he liberated them from Egypt (Exod 33:19).

In chapter 2, the phrase "the good hand

of my God was upon me," points to a God who blesses, protects, and provides (2:8; 2:18).<sup>7</sup> "If this expression derived from the secular sphere in the sense of royal bounty (1 Kgs 10:13; Esth 1:7; 2:18), then its use here will be of particular significance: what appears at one level to be the bountiful grant of the Persian king turns out to be merely a channel through which the bounty of the King of kings reaches his people."<sup>8</sup> God is also the God who calls and inspires one to do ministry. Nehemiah knows that Yahweh is the One who called him to do something for his people (2:12). "Nehemiah's spiritual need was direction from God. Even the valued few men he had as colleagues were not told everything . . . he did not chatter irresponsibly even to people who shared his ideals."<sup>9</sup> Nehemiah also knows that God is the One who will give his people success (2:20). Therefore, Nehemiah does not retaliate when encountering opposition, but rather he expresses confidence in Yahweh, the One who will make them prosper. In the midst of opposition Nehemiah is not paralyzed; rather, he gets organized. "We will arise, and we will build" is Nehemiah's resolve. "The mention of the king's authority would be far more impressive to Sanballat than the grace of God,"<sup>10</sup> but Nehemiah appeals to God's sovereignty and grace rather than the king's scepter.

After chapter 3 describes the unparalleled teamwork approach under Nehemiah's leadership, the beginning of chapter 4 focuses on the ongoing opposition led by Sanballat and Tobiah. But Nehemiah's God is presented as one who hears the prayer of the faithful who are mocked and despised (4:4). "The whole prayer is reminiscent of such Psalms as 44, 74, and 79, and in particular of the situation

which Hezekiah faced when threatened by Sennacherib."<sup>11</sup> Nehemiah encourages the people by pointing to God's character and past acts in history (4:14). This is not the first time God's honor was at stake, but he always emerges victorious. "The language of Nehemiah ("Don't be afraid") is reminiscent of words of reassurance and victory from other leaders in Scripture (cf. Exod 14:13; Num 14:9; Deut 20:3; 31:6; Josh 10:25)."<sup>12</sup> In his sovereignty, God also frustrates the enemy's plan, and this is known by both the enemy and the faithful (4:15). Nehemiah ascribes the credit "to God, who had 'frustrated their plan'—a parallel to the confusion and despair into which God had often cast his people's enemies of old (Exod 15:14-16; 23:27-28; Deut 2:25; 11:25, etc.)."<sup>13</sup>

Nehemiah's enemies continue to try and discourage the faithful from doing the work of reconstruction but Nehemiah understands that God is the one who calls and sends them to do the work (6:12). If Nehemiah had run, he would have shown a lack of trust in the God who called him. If he had entered the temple to save his life, he would have broken the Mosaic law.<sup>14</sup> The fact that he does neither of those things shows Nehemiah's strength of character and purity of heart. Nehemiah appeals to God's faithfulness and asks him to "remember" his enemies and their work (6:14). Nehemiah knows that God is the One who rewards both the righteous and the wicked, so he leaves the vengeance to God.<sup>15</sup> Nehemiah 6:15 does not merely sound a note of victory, but it also gives us great historical information. The reconstruction of the wall was done in only fifty-two days and the work was completed on the twenty-fifth day of Elul.<sup>16</sup> The subsequent verses are quick to point out that the work was done "with the help

of our God” and that God’s enemies and the surrounding nations realized this fact (6:16). Blenkinsopp suggests that perhaps “the writer draws on the theme, familiar from hymns and prophetic sermons, of the nations being forced to acknowledge the hand of God in the fortunes of Israel (e.g., Ps 118:23; 126:2).”<sup>17</sup>

Even though chapters 7-13 focus on the reformation of the people, God still plays the most important role, because He is the One who causes not just the restoration but also the reformation of the people. While chapters 1-6 focus on the physical restoration of Jerusalem, chapters 7-13 focus on the spiritual reformation of the people. Nehemiah recognizes again (as in 2:12) that God is the One who inspired him (“My God put it into my heart”) to lead the people into both a physical reconstruction and a spiritual reformation (7:5). “Doubtless he had earnestly pondered the grave problem of this great empty space enclosed with walls; then the solution comes to him, as to many earnest souls in ancient times and modern, by inspiration.”<sup>18</sup> This census, unlike the one in 1 Chronicles 21, is approved by God.

The Law of God is central in the reformation of the people. The people’s reaction to the reading of the law is worship.<sup>19</sup> As Ezra concludes the reading of the Law he blesses the LORD, “the great God” (8:6). This title given to God is unusual and it does not appear anywhere else in the Old Testament.<sup>20</sup> This great God needs to be worshiped, and the act of worship follows the revelation of God through his Law. After they read the Law and worship, they read some more while the Levites help clarify the meaning of the Law (8:8). Even though the people knew the Law as the Law of Moses, the book of Nehemiah makes it clear that God is the author of

the Law (8:14). Moses was merely God’s humble instrument through whom he revealed himself.<sup>21</sup>

The understanding of God who reveals himself and the worship of this great God are only part of the reformation process. The confession of sin is also a most crucial element in the people’s reformation (9:1-3). After the people confess their sins they are exhorted by the Levites to “Stand up and bless the LORD” (9:5).<sup>22</sup> Verse 5 starts a prayer rich in theology that can be divided accordingly: (1) God as Creator (9:6); (2) God as Covenant Maker (9:7-8); (3) God as Deliverer (9:9-11); (4) God as Sustainer (9:12-21); and (5) God as Land Giver (9:22-31). In contrast with the false, time-bound idols, God is “from everlasting to everlasting” (9:5).<sup>23</sup> While the idols’ names are worthless, God’s name is glorious and exalted (9:5b). God is the One who created the heaven and the earth. The merism “heaven and earth” of Genesis 1 is used here to point to the fact that God created everything.<sup>24</sup> God is not a lame-duck, powerless by-stander who merely started a theistic evolutionary process. God created and remains involved in his creation. He is the only one who sustains his creation (9:6). The verb employed here and translated “preserve” is the Hebrew verb *hiāyah* which means “to live, to sustain life, to preserve life.” Verse 6 concludes by affirming that the creation’s proper response to its Creator and Sustainer is worship.<sup>25</sup>

God’s greatness is affirmed in his choosing and leading Abraham. Abraham is not the main character in the cosmic and redemptive stage of history. God is the One who is great. He is the One who chose Abraham. He is the One who brought him to the Promised Land and the One who changed, not just his name, but also his

life (9:7). God is the Covenant God who sets the terms and conditions of the covenant with Abraham. The end of verse 7 emphasizes again God's faithfulness. He is the Covenant Maker, and he is also the Covenant Sustainer. Why? Because that is his character, his nature; he is righteous.

The exodus event is revisited in order to continue God's exaltation. The narrative presents Him as the God who sees the affliction of the oppressed (9:9). Nehemiah's God did not just create the heavens and the earth, but he is also close to his people, sees their plight, and hears their cry. In order to free his people from slavery, God "performed signs and wonders."<sup>26</sup> As a result God's name was exalted and, thus, his reputation was magnified (9:10).<sup>27</sup> God's miracles did not end at the shore of the Red Sea (9:11), but continued through the wilderness period. God does not just deliver his people from Egypt, he also guides them through the wilderness. God guides and provides his people pillars of cloud and fire (9:12). Yet, God's guidance is best seen, not in the pillars of cloud and fire, but in the Law he has given through his servant Moses (9:13). The pillars disappear but God's Word will stand forever. God also calls his people to rest and sanctification by observing God's "holy Sabbath" (9:14). God is portrayed as the One who provided bread and water for his people during their wilderness wandering (9:15). The expression "bread from heaven" occurs twice in the Old Testament. The first time it occurs is in Exod 16:4 where God promises the people that he will feed them even while they are in the wilderness. Nehemiah 9:15 is the only other place this expression occurs, and it is a historical look at God's fulfillment of his promise.

Even though the Israelites responded to

God's guidance and providence by rebelling against him and his servants (9:16), God still forgave them (9:17). God's graciousness and compassion are contrasted with the faithlessness of the people. Furthermore, God is presented as being slow to anger and abounding in covenantal love.<sup>28</sup> Not only did God not forsake his people (9:17), but he also continued providing them with guidance through the pillars of cloud and fire (9:19).<sup>29</sup> All this was possible because of God's great compassion (9:19).<sup>30</sup> Besides the physical provisions of bread and water, God also provided spiritually for his people (9:20). The people can receive and understand God's instruction through his Spirit.<sup>31</sup> God is the One who gave them victory in battle (9:22), prosperity in numbers, and inheritance of the Promised Land (9:23-24). The expression "numerous as the stars of heaven" is a direct reference to the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:2; 15:5). "This entire scene has the design and look of a covenant renewal ceremony (Exod 34)."<sup>32</sup>

While God is a loving and merciful God, he is also holy, righteous, and just, and he must punish sin. He is the God who judges sin (9:27). Like tardy tenants who had not paid their rent, the Israelites were evicted from their land by God, the righteous landlord. Even so, because God is a God of great compassion (9:27, 28, 31), he rescued them from the hand of their oppressors (9:28), patiently instructing and guiding them (9:29).

The expression "now therefore" in 9:32 points to a transition in Nehemiah's prayer. Until now, Nehemiah's prayer was a historical reminder of God's goodness displayed from the time of the covenant made with Abraham to the exilic period. Now Nehemiah includes himself in the

prayer by using the adverb “now,” thus pointing to the present restoration period to which he belongs. The God to which Nehemiah is praying is the same “great, mighty, and awesome” God who is faithful to the covenant and who loves people with a covenantal love. The fact that Nehemiah can call God “our God” points to the intimacy God desires with those who love and obey him (9:32). Nehemiah recognizes God’s justice and fairness and confesses that God acted justly in his judgment of a rebellious people (9:33).<sup>33</sup> After Nehemiah institutes radical reforms among the people (chapters 12-13), the book ends with Nehemiah praying that God will remember the defilement of the unfaithful and the good work he has done in the process of restoration (13:14, 22, 29, 31). Breneman affirms that “the book of Nehemiah begins with prayer and closes with prayer. For lasting results, ministry can never be separated from prayer.”<sup>34</sup>

### **What does the book of Nehemiah teach us about God’s people and the unfaithful?**

While the book of Nehemiah is first and foremost about God, the book also gives us insight about God’s people and their enemies.<sup>35</sup> The first verse of the book tells us the crucial part Nehemiah plays in the book.<sup>36</sup> In the first person, he tells of what he went through after he found out the state of affairs back home in Jerusalem. While working for the Persian king Artaxerxes, Nehemiah is made aware of the grave state of Jerusalem (1:2-3). Nehemiah sees the sad state of affairs and combines his tears with prayer and fasting. The man of God both sees and *feels* the need for reconstruction. Nehemiah is sensitive and spiritually astute (1:4). From the beginning of the book we see

that Nehemiah is a man of prayer and fasting.<sup>37</sup> This first recorded prayer in the book of Nehemiah begins with a confession of sin (1:4-7). Nehemiah knows who God is and addresses him accordingly as the Creator God (1:5). Nehemiah also knows that God’s judgment was brought about because of the people’s disobedience to the covenant God made with Moses. Nehemiah shows the marks of a true leader in that he includes himself and his father’s house among those who have sinned and brought about the Babylonian exile (1:6-7). After he confesses personal and corporate sin, Nehemiah goes on to plea for God’s help (1:8-11). Verse 8 points to the fact that the man of God knows “what says the LORD.”<sup>38</sup> Nehemiah knows the Law of the LORD given through his servant Moses. Nehemiah’s knowledge of theology does not make him puffed up; rather he has a spirit of humility and knows that he and his compatriots are just servants of the LORD (1:10). The end of chapter 1 tells us that Nehemiah’s status at the Persian court was “the cupbearer to the king” (1:11). Williamson states that “royal cupbearers in antiquity, in addition to their skill in selecting and serving wine and their duty in tasting it as proof against poison, were also expected to be convivial and tactful companions to the king.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, chapter 1 informs us that Nehemiah leaves a very respected, high-paying position, in order to rebuild Jerusalem and reform its people.

Nehemiah’s life is bathed in prayer (2:4). Brown affirms that Nehemiah’s prayer emphasizes the necessity of prayer, describes the immediacy of prayer, portrays the intimacy of prayer, demonstrates the confidence of prayer, and proves the effectiveness of prayer.<sup>40</sup> Nehemiah shows respect for his ancestors when he refers

to Jerusalem as “the place of my fathers’ tombs” (2:5). His prayer shows that the man of God is a man of vision. He sees Jerusalem not for what it is, but for what it can become (2:6). And even though he also respects the king’s authority, he recognizes that God’s provision and protection are what will give success (2:8). Even though God is with Nehemiah, human opposition still exists. However, in the midst of opposition Nehemiah’s motivation comes to the surface. He was starting the work of reconstruction because he was seeking “the welfare of the sons of Israel” (2:10). Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite stand in stark contrast with Nehemiah, and they are displeased that someone cares for God’s people (2:10).<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, like a good leader, Nehemiah assesses the damage (2:11-17a), and then takes the initiative of rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem, encouraging his Jewish brothers to join him in the reconstruction project (2:17b-18a). The people are persuaded by Nehemiah’s testimony and, thus, they start the work of rebuilding (2:18b). Even though opposition is still present and God’s enemies mock and despise God’s people (2:19), Nehemiah is confident in God’s providence and is assured that the God who called him to do the work will also give him success. Furthermore, Nehemiah refuses to compromise, denying his opponents a share of the land and legacy (2:20). Blenkinsopp clarifies that “the denial of a ‘share’ corresponds to a traditional formula denoting political dissociation (cf. 2 Sam 20:1; 1 Kgs 12:16), while ‘claim’ stands for the legal right to exercise jurisdiction.”<sup>42</sup>

Chapter 3 is an excellent example of teamwork in which God’s people gather together to do the work of reconstruction. “The list of those engaged in the

rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem moves section by section round the wall in a counter-clockwise direction, making a full circuit from and to the Sheep Gate (3:1-32).<sup>43</sup> The chapter also shows the great leadership skills of Nehemiah who organizes the reconstruction of forty-five sections of Jerusalem’s wall.<sup>44</sup> The high priest Eliashib leads by example and is mentioned first (3:1).<sup>45</sup> Fensham suggests that “Nehemiah wanted to show that he received the cooperation of the high priest and thus also that of the other priests.”<sup>46</sup> The Sheep Gate is mentioned first and receives priority probably because “sheep destined for sacrifice usually were brought in there to the market.”<sup>47</sup> The fact that the men from Jericho joined the work of reconstruction (3:2) indicates that these men viewed no distance too long to travel if they accomplished what they set out to do. Besides Jericho, Tekoa (3:5, 27), Gibeon, Mizpah (3:7), Zanoah (3:13), Beth-hacherem (3:14), Beth-zur (3:16), and Keilah (3:17) are also mentioned. People differed not just in their geographical provenance, but also in their professions and trades. Thus, goldsmiths (3:8, 31), perfumers (3:8), high ranking officials (3:9, 12, 14, 15, 16, 17), Levites (3:17), priests (3:22), temple servants (3:26), and merchants (3:32) submitted to Nehemiah’s leadership and did manual labor in order for the reconstruction to take place. In contrast with all these who exemplify humility and teamwork stand the “nobles of Tekoa” who “did not support the work” of the reconstruction.<sup>48</sup> Williamson states that the unwillingness of the leaders of the Tekoites to serve should not be in any way surprising. “The return of the exiles from Babylon at any time is bound to have caused tensions with those who had remained in the land.”<sup>49</sup>

Sanballat, Tobiah, and their supporters continued to oppose the reconstruction (4:1ff). For the second time in the book we are told that Nehemiah and the faithful are mocked by their enemies. Sanballat is singled out as one who gets very angry when hearing the good news of the progress of reconstruction. The idea that whenever something good happens someone will not be pleased is a good principle to remember when doing God's work. The anger of his heart is exteriorized through mocking words that question the strength of the people ("What are these feeble Jews doing?"),<sup>50</sup> their resolve to rebuild the wall ("Are they going to restore it for themselves?"), and their religious zeal ("Can they offer sacrifices?") (4:2). Even though Tobiah joins the tirade of mocking and discouraging words, Nehemiah turns and appeals to the God that called him to do the work (4:3-4). Nehemiah's prayer is not normative but descriptive (4:4-5). Christians today may not use this prayer as a blueprint to pray against those who oppose them. Rather, Jesus' principles laid out in Matthew 5:38-48, as well as the entire NT, should be used as our guidelines for dealing with our enemies.

Despite overt opposition and insults, the work of the faithful continued and is rewarded because "the people had a heart to work" (4:6). The anger of the unfaithful (4:7) leads them to conspire/plot against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance (to create confusion) in it (4:8).<sup>51</sup> And because piety is no substitute for hard work, the faithful react both by praying and by planning (4:9). However, even though they have faith in God, pray, and plan, the faithful still become discouraged (4:10).<sup>52</sup> "We can imagine the people singing this lament as they worked on the wall."<sup>53</sup> McConville believes that the lament in

4:10 was "a kind of chorus chanted during the work. Despite its rather negative tone it may actually have had the function of keeping the men going—not unlike the 'spirituals' which encouraged enslaved laborers of more recent times."<sup>54</sup> Discouraging words turn into threatening words from the unfaithful (4:11), but instead of becoming paralyzed, the faithful continue to be organized (4:12-13). Nehemiah's leadership skills come to the surface again as he encourages the people by pointing not to their self-esteem, but by reminding them of Yahweh's greatness and majesty (4:14).<sup>55</sup> Being encouraged by Nehemiah's words the workers return to work while the unfaithful realize that God was fighting against them (4:15-19). The faithful understand that the cause they are fighting is God's cause, and they recognize his principal part in the war of words or swords.<sup>56</sup> Nehemiah leads by example. The work of reconstruction continued (4:21) while Nehemiah persevered in encouraging the people, planning the work, and working side by side with his brothers (4:22-23).

Chapter 5 points to internal problems stemming from injustice, oppression, and economic hardship.<sup>57</sup> While his enemies were angry in the face of good things, Nehemiah is angered in the face of injustice (5:6). Nehemiah confronts the sin of the nobles and rulers (5:7-8) and outlines steps for correction (5:9-11). Those who were in the wrong obey Nehemiah's words and move to make proper restitution (5:12-13a). Only after obedience and restitution take place, can the people praise the LORD (5:13b). Unlike his predecessors, Nehemiah continues to lead by example, and even though he was appointed governor, he did not operate with a "that's-not-in-my-

job-description mentality.” Rather, with humility, Nehemiah himself worked on the wall (5:14-16). Yamauchi observes that “Nehemiah’s behavior as governor was guided by principles of service rather than by opportunism.”<sup>58</sup>

Nehemiah confronted both external and internal problems. After dealing with the internal problems of injustice and oppression in chapter 5, Nehemiah faces external dangers again in chapter 6. Those who opposed the work of reconstruction continued their resistance by conspiring to harm Nehemiah, but because God’s hand is still upon him, Nehemiah discerned that the enemy’s call to a meeting is only a trap (6:1-2). Fensham observes that “Nehemiah suspected foul play. It is possible that he had received certain information which uncovered their plot; perhaps both sides made use of informers.”<sup>59</sup> And while the enemy sent four requests for a meeting, every time Nehemiah turned down their invitation because his priorities were in order (6:3-4), and his priority now was the reconstruction of the wall. In this episode Nehemiah displays wisdom in discerning and replying, and persistence in doing the work. His enemies resort to lying (6:5), but even though Nehemiah is accused of trying to overturn the Persian monarchy (6:6-7), Nehemiah again discerns the enemy’s lies (6:8). Nehemiah recognizes that he might become weakened by all the external threats and so he prays that God will strengthen him (6:9).

The enemy’s plan to deter Nehemiah continues when Tobiah and Sanballat bribe a priest by the name of Shemaiah son of Delaiah.<sup>60</sup> Nehemiah’s discernment is again commendable because he understands that Shemaiah was hired to scare him into sinning (6:12-13). “The strategy to discredit the leader is a subtle one and

is common today.”<sup>61</sup> Nehemiah prays a short imprecatory prayer through which he leaves the vengeance to God (6:14). Until now Nehemiah was portrayed as the leader who saw the need for reconstruction, felt the need, prayed to God about the need, and organized people to meet the need. Now the task of rebuilding the wall is completed, which Neh 6:15 tells us was completed in fifty-two days. The speed with which the reconstruction of the wall was accomplished points to God’s guidance and grace, and to Nehemiah’s leadership skills. Even the unfaithful see that God’s hand was at work (6:16), although they do not repent of their rebellion but continue their work of intimidation (6:17-19).

Chapter 7 begins the second part of the book, which focuses on the reformation of the people.<sup>62</sup> Nehemiah’s leadership skills come to the forefront again as he appoints people to do the different tasks needed around Jerusalem (7:1). Hanani (1:2) is singled out as a faithful and God-fearing man (7:2).<sup>63</sup> Nehemiah proves again to be a great organizer, delegating work at the temple (7:1) and at the city gates (7:2-3), and planning the repopulation of Jerusalem (7:4). No task is too menial for Nehemiah if God is the One inspiring him. To accomplish the task of city repopulation God guides Nehemiah to gather the leadership of the city and to take a census (7:5-72). Williamson affirms that “the purpose of the gathering was to draw up a census of the population, on the basis of which an equitable decision could be taken as to who should be moved into the city.”<sup>64</sup>

In unity, the faithful gather, asking Ezra, the great priest and teacher of the Law, to read from the Law of God given to the people through God’s servant Moses.



Even though the reading took about six hours, the people were attentive because their reformation can only be attained as they respond with obedience to God's revelation (8:1-5). After Ezra blessed the LORD, the people respond by worshipping God (8:6).<sup>65</sup> Thirteen Levites interpret the Law, one of the many tasks of the Levites outlined in the Mosaic Law and practiced at the temple (Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 17:7-9; 35:3; Neh 8:7-8). The people respond to the hearing and understanding of God's word by weeping. Their tears were most likely tears of repentance. "The reading of the law and its explanation to the people had its effect. They became aware of their sins and wept."<sup>66</sup> Both Nehemiah and Ezra encourage the people to rejoice and, in the middle of their rejoicing, also to remember those who are too poor to feast (8:9-10). The fact that the people understood the Law first led them to repentance, and then the tears turned into joy as they celebrated the understanding of God's words to them (8:11-12).

The people's reformation continues with a time of prayer and fasting (9:1). The sackcloth and dirt represented the general sign for mourning, and the subsequent verses indicate that their prayer was one of confession and repentance of sin. The people who entered into a covenant renewal with Yahweh stress purity and, thus, separate themselves from those outside of the community of faith.<sup>67</sup> The covenant renewal will take place only after the Israelites have confessed and repented of their sins (9:2). The covenant renewal ceremonies continued for days and they involved the reading of the Law, confession of sin, and worship of Yahweh (9:3). The prayer that follows (9:6-37) is introduced by the exhortation, "Arise, bless the LORD your God forever and ever" (9:5b).

The prayer is aimed at God's exaltation for his past redemptive acts in history.<sup>68</sup> The prayer expresses the people's faith in the God who made a covenant with their father Abraham, the One who redeemed them from Egyptian slavery, but also the One who justly punished them for their rebellion (9:6-21). Nehemiah 9:38 describes a covenant renewal between the Israelites and Yahweh. "The force of the agreement is attested by the fact of its being set in writing and sealed as a guarantee of its authenticity and to preserve against subsequent tampering."<sup>69</sup> The people continue their resolve to be true to God's law and to stop the practice of intermarrying with Gentiles (10:28-39).<sup>70</sup>

The faithful gather for a special ceremony for the dedication of the temple (12:27-30), which involved the ritual of purification. Williamson suggests that this ritual "may have involved washing of self and of clothes, ritual sprinkling, the sacrifice of sin-offering, fasting, and abstinence from sexual intercourse; cf. Exod 19:10, 14-15; Lev 16:28; Num 8:5-8, 19."<sup>71</sup> As a remarkable leader, Nehemiah leads in the organization of the processions and dedication service and in the delegation of responsibilities at the temple (12:31-47).

The reading of God's Law continues to produce change in the life of the people and they continue to separate themselves from those outside the Israelite community of faith (13:1-3). After a trip to the Persian court, Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and immediately takes a firm stand against Tobiah who defiled the temple by his mere presence there and orders that the rooms be cleansed (13:4-9). Fensham argues that it was "an act of desecration to bring into a sacred chamber a profane person such as Tobiah."<sup>72</sup> Nehemiah reor-

ganizes the Levites and reinstitutes the tithes that seem to have been forgotten during Nehemiah's absence (13:10-14).

The book of Nehemiah ends by pointing to the great leadership skills of Nehemiah. A godly leader confronts sin. Nehemiah confronts those who have forsaken the fourth commandment that set aside the Sabbath for rest and worship, and he demands that the Levites purify themselves and "sanctify the Sabbath day" (13:15-22). Lastly, Nehemiah confronts those who married pagan women (13:23-31) reminding them that Solomon's downfall was brought about by the foreign women who turned his heart away from the LORD (1 Kgs 11:1-9).<sup>73</sup>

### Conclusion

The book of Nehemiah shows us the beauty and greatness of the God who creates, sustains, makes covenants with humans, and restores his people to a genuine relationship with him. In God's economy there are great servant-leaders like Nehemiah who accept God's call and work in his "vineyard," and there are those who oppose the work. Just as in the time of Nehemiah, God calls people today who will do the work of the ministry in the midst of opposition and ridicule.

<i>What he does</i>	<i>His motivation</i>
Prays for his people 1:4	Because God preserves his covenant 1:5
Plans for his people 2:6-8	Because God inspires him 2:12
Perseveres against enemies for his people 4:9, 23	Because God perverts the enemies' plans 4:15, 20
Pleads for unity among his people 5:10-11	Because God is pleased with unity 5:9, 13
Perceives falsehood and remains faithful 6:2, 8, 12	Because God proclaims his name among the nations 6:16

**Chart 1: Nehemiah as servant-leader**

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>See Paul R. House, *Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 518-22.

<sup>2</sup>Gen 24:3; 7; 2 Chr 36:23; Ezra 1:2; Neh 1:4, 5; 2:4, 20; and Jonah 1:9.

<sup>3</sup>Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (New American Commentary 10; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1993), 171.

<sup>4</sup>See Solomon's prayer in 2 Chr 6:40. Both Solomon and Nehemiah appeal to a God who sees and hears.

<sup>5</sup>Nehemiah's prayer is rooted in God's Torah. Nehemiah 1:8-9 is a paraphrase of Deut 30:1-5.

<sup>6</sup>This is a not a new idea, unique with Nehemiah. The tripartite sin-judgment-restoration motif is found throughout the prophetic material, especially the Minor Prophets.

<sup>7</sup>The phrase "the hand of the LORD his God was on him" also occurs in Ezra 7:6, 9, 28; 8:18, 22, 31; Neh 2:8, 18.

<sup>8</sup>H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (Word Biblical Commentary 16; Waco, TX: Word, 1985), 93.

<sup>9</sup>Raymond Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, (The Bible Speaks Today; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 54.

<sup>10</sup>Loring W. Batten, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Books of Ezra and*

- Nehemiah* (International Critical Commentary; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 204.
- <sup>11</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 217. Also, see 2 Kgs 19:14-19.
- <sup>12</sup>Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 198.
- <sup>13</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 227.
- <sup>14</sup>See Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 212.
- <sup>15</sup>Deut 32:35; Ps 94:1; Rom 12:19.
- <sup>16</sup>While most scholars agree that Elul corresponds to August-September, some suggest that an October date is more likely. For an in-depth discussion regarding chronology see R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 75* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1956).
- <sup>17</sup>Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 273.
- <sup>18</sup>Batten, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 264.
- <sup>19</sup>See Leslie Allen, "For He is Good . . . : Worship in Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Worship and the Hebrew Bible: Essays in Honor of John T. Willis*, ed. M. Patrick Graham (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 15-34.
- <sup>20</sup>The title *hā'elohim hāgādōl* does not appear anywhere else in the Old Testament. However, the form *hā'el hāgādōl* can be found in Neh 1:5; 9:32; Jer 32:18; and Dan 9:4.
- <sup>21</sup>Nehemiah 9:3 mentions the Book of the Law of the LORD, again pointing to the divine provenance of the Law.
- <sup>22</sup>See L. J. Liebreich, "The Impact of Nehemiah 9:5-37 on the Liturgy of the Synagogue," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 32 (1961): 227-237.
- <sup>23</sup>See F. C. Fensham, "Neh 9 and Pss 105, 106, and 136: Post-Exilic Historical Traditions in Poetic Form," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 9 (1981): 35-51.
- <sup>24</sup>For an in-depth look on the use of merism in the Hebrew Bible see Joze Krasovec, "Merism: Polar Expression in Biblical Hebrew," *Biblica* 64, no. 2 (1983): 231-39.
- <sup>25</sup>See Frederick C. Holmgren, "Faithful Abraham and the 'amānā Covenant: Nehemiah 9,6-10,1" in *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 104, no. 2 (1992): 249-254.
- <sup>26</sup>The expression "signs and wonders" appears frequently in Deuteronomy in Moses' homilies that focus on God's delivering his people from Egypt (See Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 26:8; 29:3; and 34:11). For an excellent treatment of the Exodus see John J. Davis, *Moses and the gods of Egypt* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986).
- <sup>27</sup>In the Ancient Near East someone's name was equivalent to his/her reputation.
- <sup>28</sup>The chain of attributes "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness" also appears in Exod 34:6; Ps 103:8; Joel 2:13; and Jonah 4:2.
- <sup>29</sup>God's promise of not forsaking his people is also mentioned in Deut 31:6; 31:8; and 1 Kgs 6:13.
- <sup>30</sup>Three times in the book of Nehemiah the noun "compassion" is modified by the adjective "great." The same expression, "great compassion," is found describing God in Isa 54:7 and Dan 9:18.
- <sup>31</sup>Some Greek versions have "holy spirit."
- <sup>32</sup>Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 240.
- <sup>33</sup>Nehemiah confesses the fact that God is just both at the beginning (9:8) and the end of the prayer (9:33).
- <sup>34</sup>Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 275-76.
- <sup>35</sup>In this article Nehemiah and those who are doing the reconstruction are presented as God's people, while Sanballat, Tobiah, and those who oppose the reconstruction will be presented as the unfaithful. See David C. Kraemer, "On the Relationship of the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 59 (1993): 73-92.
- <sup>36</sup>In the Hebrew Bible the book of Ezra-Nehemiah appears as a single book. The fact that both books have first person narratives in them suggests that both Ezra and Nehemiah have written the books that bear their names, with some editor/compiler putting the two together in a single book.
- <sup>37</sup>All great men and women of the Bible and of church history were men and women of prayer and fasting.
- <sup>38</sup>Dr. Robert Smith, preaching professor at Beeson Divinity School suggests that before one stands up and declares, "Thus says the LORD," one must know *what* the LORD says.
- <sup>39</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 174.
- <sup>40</sup>Brown, *The Message of Nehemiah*, 47-48.
- <sup>41</sup>See W. C. Van Wyk and A. P. B. Breytenbach, "The Nature of Conflict in Ezra-Nehemiah," *Hervormde*

- Teologiese Studies* 57, nos. 3-4 (2001): 1254-63.
- <sup>42</sup>Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 226.
- <sup>43</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 198.
- <sup>44</sup>Ten gates are included in the reconstruction project (Neh 3:1, 3, 6, 13-15, 26, 28-29, 31).
- <sup>45</sup>Ezra 10:6; Neh 3:20-21.
- <sup>46</sup>Charles F. Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 173.
- <sup>47</sup>Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 186.
- <sup>48</sup>The Hebrew reads "their nobles did not bring their necks in the service of the LORD."
- <sup>49</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 204.
- <sup>50</sup>The word "Jews" here might be used as an ethnic slur aimed at insulting the people's national heritage.
- <sup>51</sup>The number of enemies increase and now includes the Ashdodites.
- <sup>52</sup>Verse 10 contains a lament "indicative of the despair of melancholy" (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 226).
- <sup>53</sup>Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 196.
- <sup>54</sup>J. Gordon McConville, *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther*, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1985), 91.
- <sup>55</sup>Nehemiah's leadership skills are also seen in the fact that he correctly assesses the situation ("When I saw their fear"), thus seeing the need for encouragement ("Do not be afraid").
- <sup>56</sup>The idea that God will fight for them is also present in Exod 14:14; Deut 1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Josh 10:14, 42; and 23:10.
- <sup>57</sup>There seems to be no support in this chapter for today's "prosperity gospel" euphoria created by those who only preach and teach the Bible selectively.
- <sup>58</sup>Edwin Yamauchi, "Ezra-Nehe-miah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein (vol. 4; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 710.
- <sup>59</sup>Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 200. While Fensham may be correct, it is also possible that God helped Nehemiah discern the imminent danger.
- <sup>60</sup>First Chronicles mentions that Delaiah was a priest; thus Shemaiah was also a priest who had access to the temple where he suggests that Nehemiah seek refuge.
- <sup>61</sup>Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 212.
- <sup>62</sup>Chapters 1-6 focus on the reconstruction of the wall while chapters 7-13 focus on the reformation of the people.
- <sup>63</sup>Hanani (7:2) is a shortened form of Hananiah (1:2).
- <sup>64</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 271.
- <sup>65</sup>The verbs "to worship" and "to bow down" are sometimes used together (Gen 24:26, 28; Exod 4:31; 12:27; 2 Chr 29:29).
- <sup>66</sup>Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 218.
- <sup>67</sup>See Saul Olyan, "Purity Ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah as a Tool to Reconstitute the Community," *Journal for the Study of Judaism in the Persian, Hellenistic and Roman Period* 35, no. 1 (2004): 1-16.
- <sup>68</sup>See the previous section above, "What does the book of Nehemiah teach us about God?"
- <sup>69</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 332.
- <sup>70</sup>Nehemiah 10:30-39 outlines the stipulations/obligations of the covenant. For more on the issue of "intermarriage" see John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (vol. 1; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 747-51.
- <sup>71</sup>Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 373.
- <sup>72</sup>Fensham, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 261.
- <sup>73</sup>Fensham suggests that Nehemiah received permission from the Persian court and that is why he was able to strike some of the men and pull out their hair (*ibid.*, 267). Williamson is probably correct when he suggests that this incident was "localized and restricted," Nehemiah being "provoked by the children's language into a sudden and violent outburst" (Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 398-399).